

The Duxbury Almshouse

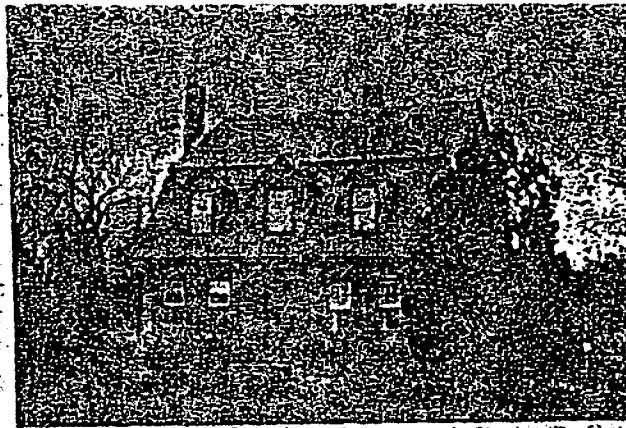
By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

Ninety Thanksgiving baskets found their way into as many homes otherwise facing a bleak and lonely day last week. Perhaps a thousand people from churches, schools or just plain helpful citizens of Duxbury, according to Isabel Sibilio's estimate, shared in this holiday effort sponsored by the Christian Service Committee of the Duxbury Council of Churches. This "Holiday Basket" program, which includes Christmas and Easter as well, began some years ago when people from Holy Family Church led by Mrs. John Spence picked up the program of the Federal Government's surplus food efforts, terminated at that time.

Care for the needy, the handicapped, for the aging and indeed for the insane and those in prison has been the hallmark of civilized societies since primitive times. The outsider, the alien, the undesirable, the stranger — all who do not fit into the prevailing culture have always provided an acid test for the validity of that culture. Obligation to deal acceptably with them has been noted in human documents of moral behavior since early times.

"For the stranger that is in your midst shall be as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." — Leviticus 19:34. Originally seen as a political admonition it is by extension a dogma regarding all human relationships with the "deviant." It should of course be added at once that this admonition has been honored far more often in the "breach than in the observance." — Hamlet I, 4.

How do you deal with those whose pattern of behavior falls outside that of established society? This problem has always constituted a major preoccupation for all communities and cultures. What to do with those who can't keep up with others in skills and intelligence, who by reason of incompetence or willful disturbance (rape, murder, robbery also) ostracize themselves from the human brotherhood? These and similar questions are again thrusting themselves into the forefront of our thinking. Furthermore, with the new federal spending cuts, can we afford our present level of caring? Shall we build more and larger prisons so overcrowded? Shall we take over nursing homes and hospitals, now exacting skyrocketing prices. (My latest info on the cost of having a baby in a hospital places it above \$1500.) And what about our beleaguered Social Security?



The Poor Farm as it looks today.

Duxbury has faced all these problems in the past and wrestled with them with indifferent success. Despite divine admonition even in the days before the separation of "Church and State" (i.e., when "Town and Church" "meeting" were one), the problem was acute, and citizens balked again and again as the issue surfaced. People were torn between conscience and perceived competence. "Meeting" was confronted with the necessity of dealing with the matter, and a first expedient was a "farming out" of individuals (and often would "assign" them) to private homes and seek out funds to support them through close relatives. On occasion property left to heirs would be sold and proceeds used to support an aunt or uncle for example, in need. Each case was handled individually by "meeting," but the hit or miss efforts from the late 1600s on finally required some specific organization.

This took shape in 1817 if our records are correct (they are often a bit sketchy as so many things were not written down at the time). A single selectman was appointed to head up the effort and see that all indigent citizens were cared for. This was 11 years before the town separated itself from the church. Three years later the selectmen of the town were named also the "Overseers of the Poor," a title they carried until 1927 when they were designated "The Board of Public Welfare." At a special town meeting held on March 8, 1819, after a raucous debate and by a narrow margin, funds were appropriated to build an "Almshouse." This was ready for occupancy on the 10th of May next with the following instructions for the superintendent: "Buy 2 cows, a few pigs, dig a well and a cesspool and set up fencing for all the other animals" (presumably hens, horses, sheep and dogs). A recent ordinance in the town read, "roving herds of animals (except cows) must be kept in fenced enclosures." Does our dog officer think she has problems?

The budget for the Almshouse in 1820 was \$700 — and the budget for schools that year was \$1500 — a scant 7 years later that for the almshouse equaled the one for schools — but this would change soon. A "house for distracted persons" was built on the property with a jail across the street. A "Tramphouse" was also erected a little distance away, reached by a path known as "Tramphouse Lane." Dorothy Wentworth reports that when this land was in the hands of a developer a few years ago she urged him to retain this name but he replied, "I'm sorry, but I don't believe I could sell a house to any Bostonian with a number on Tramphouse Lane." Meeting House Lane won out, as we know. Inquiries at a few of the families now living there reveal that some at least "would be delighted to have an address on 'Tramphouse Lane' in Duxbury."

In 1845 a "Schoolhouse for the Insane" was attached to the main Almshouse and the entire area of 20 acres soon acquired the name "Poor Farm." Its northern border was opposite what is now called Surplus St., but its name then as the one road of ac-

cess was "Poverty Lane." It was the expressed hope that the Poor Farm become self-supporting and a few annual reports indicate that they often approached this goal. Around the turn of the century a report boasts that the farm was self-supporting for all except the 3 months in the dead of winter. Efforts to make it a "one crop" facility, like a hen or a dairy or a potato farm, failed and diversification became the rule. A run-down on the inventory of the institution at the close of the fiscal year (March 15 or Town Meeting) is interesting as it gives a glimpse at the lifestyle of the residents. The report listed the following as "leftovers" (as of March 3, 1887):

1 1/2 barrels flour	2 lbs. sugar
1 barrel crackers	53 lbs. butter
75 lbs. lard	4 lbs. cheese
3 lbs. rice	32 lbs. soap
1 1/2 lbs. coffee	1 1/2 lbs. spices, pepper
1 box salt	2/3 barrel salt pork
40 lbs. ham	33 lbs. beef
1 cow	1 heifer
1 ton English (sweet) hay	1/2 ton salt hay
2 barrels vinegar (for pickling cucumbers, beets, onions, cabbages, etc.)	
2 bushels turnips	18 bushels potatoes
3/4 ton coal	2 gal. soft soap
2 cords oak wood	12 cords manure

The Almshouse contained 11 persons with an average age of 71; one resident was 35. A few years earlier we discover a list of expenses which yields its own points of interest:

6 cords pine wood	\$30.00
2 bushes rye	4.50
Sam Bradford's cow	55.00
Isaac Winslow's coffin	4.50
Tea and sugar	30.00
Edward Wadsworth's 2 pigs	12.35
Geo. Prior flour & corn meal	204.24
Sylvanus Prior teaming & 1 lb. beans	10.72
Gershom Bradford	
flour, grain, meal, shorts and shoals (small pigs)	452.97
Ford's Store -- goods	822.30
Judah Chandler, services	408.83

At this time (1880-1920) tremendous efforts were made for the town to take care of all its "outsiders," -- needy, mentally ill, retarded, all of whom were urged to work on the farm if possible. Even the "distracted persons" too wild to be handled locally were taken to the "Lunatic Asylums" at Taunton and Danvers at town expense. In fact the cost of this latter case often approached that of the "Almshouse" itself. For instance, the expenses for the Almshouse in 1887 were \$1457.36 -- and the cost of care for the "lunatics" sent to the "Lunatic Asylums" at Taunton and Danvers ran to \$1262. It was a noble effort. It comprised along with highways and schools the 3 major items of town operating expenses. Looking back, from the present perspective, it was indeed a disproportionate burden for town taxpayers.

Unfortunately the house burned to the ground in 1894 and a committee was appointed at a special town meeting comprised of Nathaniel Noyes, Frederick Knapp and Laurence Bradford to make plans for a new one. The cost was not to exceed \$5,000. The actual price was \$4,717. It was completed in 1895 and still stands today at the corner of Prior Farm Rd. and Depot St. I remember it well in the old days, as my Father used to supply it with meat products, usually leaving it for the last stop on the route to provide a few bargain items like corned beef brisket and sweetbreads and pork ends.

Local help for the needy was gradually phased out as the state and county took it over, and when the burden was so great in the Depression, a bare minimum was carried out by the town. The Almshouse lost its urgency and its usefulness diminished through World War II until it was finally sold at auction to a family named Mercer in 1946. Later a state police officer named Daly bought it from them and the present occupants, Ronald and Joy Ladd Guy are, as they said, "enjoying living in the Poorhouse." I think there is a real distinction to live in the "Poorhouse," and I wish I could go into more detail about the various stages of use the old house enjoyed. It certainly would make fascinating reading for one interested in social welfare.

The word "welfare" had not been coined at this time; that remained for a later day. People were treated probably more personally and individually.

Remedies were applied to fit each case. Unemployment (of course in a farming era there was none of this; the word didn't exist). But cash-paying activity was often provided by extending and encouraging efforts at fishing and hunting and especially clamming. I remember selectmen permitting men down on their luck to chop wood in the town forest, some for heating their homes and cooking and the rest to sell for income.

Today all welfare centers in out-of-town agencies. We have our veterans' agent, Bartlett Bradley, and our Senior Shuttle, and Senior Citizens are welcome to a bountiful meal (I know, I've been a regular taker of the meals) on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the high school, and we hear rumblings that many of these programs will have to be cut back as the new government spending reforms take hold. How far can society go toward supporting its citizens out of the public treasury? There are real problems here as we all know. But whatever we decide to do, and we must not look for easy answers, we will enable our culture to grow in meaningfulness and purpose for all its citizens in proportion to the sincerity and realism with which we face this problem.

Debbie Bornheimer and Lorraine Collins and Mrs. John Spence and Isabel Sibilo and the thousand plus of Duxbury who work to provide holiday baskets are doing much to make "caring" a personal matter. They told me, "This is in no sense to provide all the needs of these people, even for a day -- we do not have enough resources for that -- the government has to tend to that. We are simply sending a message of cheer to them, to let them know that Duxbury folks remember them on these holidays." It is a good effort, and it does help to know that there are many who step up to help bring this message to the lonely and despairing people in our midst.